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ABSTRACT

This paper explores current Colorado postsecondary academic assessment and accountability efforts and offers a framework for decision-making about how to alter or enhance those efforts. The paper makes a distinction between assessment and accountability efforts from the statewide perspective. Assessment is defined as the use of measurement techniques to determine the impact of education on students. Accountability is defined as the use of assessment results to inform the public of the performance of the state's postsecondary education system. Also described are current practices which range from the legislatively mandated Higher Education Accountability Program (HEAP) to institution-based activities. A following section analyzes the adequacy of these current efforts arguing that HEAP is generally successful, that program accreditation and program review are effective, and that "The Scorecard," an annual publication offering a summary of a number of measures, has potential for becoming a valuable tool. National perspectives on postsecondary assessment and accountability are also reviewed. The paper concludes by proposing four options: (1) maintain assessment and accountability efforts currently underway; (2) discontinue or scale back current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability; (3) develop one system to do both assessment and accountability; and (4) continue current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability efforts. (Author/JB)

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COLORADO COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER PLAN BACKGROUND PAPER:

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How Can Postsecondary Education be More Accountable to Colorado Citizens?

Colorado Commission on Higher Education
1300 Broadway, Second Floor
Denver, Colorado 80203
(303) 866-2723
David A. Longanecker, Executive Director

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HOW CAN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION BE MORE ACCOUNTABLE TO COLORADO CITIZENS?

(COLORADO HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER PLAN ISSUE #4)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public perception of the competencies of college graduates, both in Colorado and nationally, has increased interest in developing ways to assess the college competencies of graduates as well as increase the accountability of postsecondary education to the public. This paper provides a framework for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to decide whether current postsecondary academic assessment and accountability efforts are sufficient.

The paper first makes a distinction between assessment and accountability efforts from the statewide perspective, then describes and evaluates these current efforts. National perspectives on postsecondary assessment and accountability are introduced to assist the consideration of these efforts in Colorado. The paper concludes with four options for Commission consideration. They are:

Option 1: **Maintain assessment and accountability efforts that are currently underway.**

Option 2: **Discontinue (or downsize) current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability efforts.**

Option 3: **Develop one system to accomplish objectives of both assessment and accountability.**

Option 4: **Continue current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability efforts.**

This paper was prepared for Commission discussion by a CCHE staff and commissioner committee that included Mark Chisholm, Stephanie Cunningham, Commissioner Christine Johnson, Geri Reinardy, and Sharon Samson.

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to develop an analytical framework for the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to use for two purposes. First, to evaluate whether current academic assessment efforts (including what is widely known as the statewide accountability program) at public postsecondary institutions are accomplishing their objectives. Second, to assist the Commission in determining to what extent individual Colorado institutions, as well as the entire Colorado system of public postsecondary education, should enhance accountability efforts--efforts that articulate high standards for postsecondary education, then measure and report on the achievement of these standards to the public.

II. BACKGROUND

Purpose

There are several motivations for this project. The first is the public perception that colleges are not adequately preparing graduates to be both productive professionals and responsible citizens. Increasingly, some business leaders, employers, and to a certain extent, the general public, charge that college graduates do not have the technical or general information that they should. In addition, the media and popular press have promoted this notion. News stories compare how little American adults know about geography, history and other subjects compared to non-Americans. Widely read books such as The Closing of the American Mind, and Cultural Literacy, which declare how little Americans know, have captured the attention of many Americans, and have risen to the top of bestseller lists in recent years. The federal government has also taken an interest in this subject. A 1991 U.S. Department of Labor Report concluded that workers lack the basic skills needed in the workplace. In addition to all these factors, there is little doubt that recent concern about the competencies of public K-12 graduates has also affected the perception about college graduates.

The accuracy of these public perceptions is uncertain. This uncertainty creates a dilemma for American higher education. Because of the absence of an effective, systematic process to assess the abilities of its graduates, higher education can neither dispel or confirm this perception. As a result, interest in assessment and accountability is gaining momentum at the national and state levels. At the national level, three significant activities are underway. Federal "Student Right to Know" legislation requires all colleges to report student graduation rates by 1993. Also, recently passed federal "Ability to Benefit" legislation requires first-time college students without a high school diploma who want to receive federal student aid to pass an entrance exam. In addition, a National Governors' Association task force, as part of President Bush's National Education Goals Program, has

recommended the development of a voluntary national postsecondary assessment of graduates' ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems.

In Colorado, legislative interest in assessing college students became apparent in 1985 with the passage of higher education accountability legislation. This legislation requires institutions of higher education to "design and implement a systematic program to assess the knowledge, capacities, and skills developed by students in academic and co-curricular programs." While the Colorado higher education accountability legislation was primarily designed to be "assessment" oriented, i.e, gathering information about the performance of students, it also established an expectation of "accountability" by requiring institutions to publicly disclose the results of student assessment. Specifically, the law requires the results of institutional assessment "shall be communicated to the public, its students, and potential students."

Meaning of Commonly-Used Terms Throughout this Paper

The following definitions, or common understandings of selected terms, will be used throughout this paper.

Assessment: Assessment is the use of measurement techniques to determine the impact of education on students. The purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. The primary users of assessment results are faculty.

Student assessment is outcome oriented, referring to activities that measure what students know and learn. One example is the Colorado Higher Education Accountability Program (HEAP). Institutional assessment is process oriented, determining if institutions have provided the services needed to facilitate student learning. Examples include academic program review, and accreditation review.

Accountability: Accountability is the use of assessment results to inform the public of the performance of the state's postsecondary education system. The purpose of accountability efforts is to assure the public, and elected officials that represent them, that tax dollars invested in postsecondary education are used effectively. Accountability efforts can also assist state-level policy makers in their responsibilities. Since the primary user of accountability efforts is the general public, accountability reports, unlike assessment, are presented in summary form. Some states, including Colorado, have established standards of accountability, or specific acceptable levels of performance that institutions are required to meet. Florida, for example, has instituted a "rising junior" exam (which assesses whether college juniors have

gained an acceptable level of knowledge), and Colorado has developed statewide admission standards and ethnic minority graduation rates.

Standards: Standards are predetermined levels of achievement that institutions or students are expected to meet.

Postsecondary Institutions: Postsecondary institutions include all 28 Colorado publicly-supported two-year community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities.

III. VALUES OF ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Value of Assessment

There are several reasons why postsecondary institutions consider assessment activities valuable. The primary value of assessment to institutions is determining how effective instruction is for student learning. In other words, *how much students are learning, and whether students are actually learning what they are expected to learn.* Individual campuses use the results of assessment to make curriculum changes that improve instruction, and ultimately, student learning. The assessment process itself can be a useful tool to ensure dialogue about curriculum both within and between academic areas. As a panel of Colorado assessment directors at a recent conference told the audience, "The assessment process can be as illuminating as the results." Assessment can also help to shift institutional focus from research to instruction. As another faculty member recently observed, "What gets evaluated is what gets noticed."

The Value of Accountability

Accountability is valuable from the statewide perspective in two ways. First, it ensures that the postsecondary system not only offers, but also delivers to individual citizens, the knowledge and skills that they need. In addition, accountability assures taxpayers can be confident that the postsecondary system which they provide is effective. As Howard R. Bowen stated in The Products of Higher Education, published in New Directions for Institutional Research, Volume 1, Spring, 1974:

> "The idea of accountability is quite simple. It means that colleges and universities are responsible for conducting their affairs so that the outcomes are worth the cost. It implies that institutional efforts should be directed toward appropriate goals and that the outcomes should be consistent with these goals and should be achieved at minimum cost. It also implies that the institution should report credible evidence on the degree to which it is achieving its mission and on its costs."

IV. CURRENT ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS IN COLORADO

Assessment Activities

Colorado postsecondary assessment activities described in this paper range from the legislatively mandated Higher Education Accountability Program (HEAP), to institutional-based activities such as the ongoing review of existing academic programs. In addition, it is important to acknowledge a wide variety of on-going institutional efforts to improve the educational experience of students.

1. COLORADO HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM (HEAP)

The Colorado Higher Education Accountability Program was established by the legislature in 1985 (C.R.S. 23-13-101). Among other specific directives, the law requires that institutions of higher education demonstrate improvements in student knowledge, capacities, and skills between entrance and graduation. In addition, the law directs CCHE to report the status of institutional implementation efforts to the legislature annually. CCHE staff monitor HEAP at each institution, provide assistance to institutions, and review institutional compliance with the law. Specifically, CCHE staff look for evidence that each institution assesses students in terms of their general education as well as their understanding of their chosen academic field. In addition, CCHE staff document changes that institutions make in curriculum and practice as a result of assessment findings.

Institutional HEAP reports reveal that institutions use a variety of techniques to measure student outcomes in both general education, academic field, or both. Some institutions use standardized tests such as the ACT COMP (College Outcome Measures Program) to assess students' understanding of general education. More and more institutions are, however, replacing standardized tests with other techniques such as general education skills tests. These exams assess students' abilities to read, compose and compute. Many of these tests are developed by faculty at each campus who are familiar with individual curriculums and desired student outcomes.

Institutions use a combination of several measures to assess students' grasp of their academic field. One frequently used approach is the Major Field Assessment Test (MFAT), a standardized test of academic field and emphasis area. Another approach is the use of portfolios, a accumulation of materials that students have produced throughout their education. Portfolios provide a subjective means for substantive faculty evaluation of whether or not the student has a good grasp of their field. The portfolio approach is often used together with a senior seminar course, which integrates learning from major classes. Assessment of actual performance is yet another type of assessment used mostly in the performing and visual arts, as well as in engineering. Students are assessed on their performance in recitals, performances, exhibitions, or demonstration projects.

Finally, institutions survey alumni, employers, and both continuing and former students to assess student opinions of knowledge attained in both general education and chosen academic field.

2. INSTITUTIONAL ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW

State law passed in 1985 [C.R.S. 23-1-107 (3)] directed governing boards to periodically review and evaluate academic programs at each of their institutions, consistent with institutional role and mission. Although this law contained the first mandated assessment measures in Colorado, institutional review of academic programs has been in place for 12 years. Unlike HEAP, which focuses primarily on student outcomes, academic program review uses student outcomes as just one element of a comprehensive process to determine program effectiveness. Institutions examine both programmatic achievements and deficiencies to strengthen programs and ultimately student learning. Frequently, findings of academic program review result in curriculum changes. Some institutions couple academic program review to HEAP activities.

Accountability Activities

Accountability activities in Colorado range from CCHE analysis and presentation of statewide data about the performance of the state's postsecondary system to institutional and academic program accreditation review. Governing board staff also analyze accountability data.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM (HEAP) ANNUAL REPORTS

The presentation of the HEAP annual report to the state legislature, and the dissemination of its findings, is one means of informing the public of the effectiveness of the public postsecondary system. The 1992 HEAP report described significant progress of students attending Colorado colleges and receiving degrees, as well as serious concerns. It reported that student advising is deficient at many institutions, and that remedial education, teacher education assessment, and minority retention and graduation rates should all be improved. While not highly publicized beyond the higher education community, this report did receive the attention of state legislators.

2. INSTITUTIONAL AND ACADEMIC PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

Regional accrediting associations, such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities, play an important role in both accountability and assessment by providing public assurance of an institution's effectiveness. Traditionally, accrediting associations have required institutions to demonstrate, once every five to seven years, that they have adequate human, financial, and physical resources necessary to be effective. Recently, however, accrediting associations added student outcomes as a significant component of

accreditation review. The North Central Association (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education) 1989 Statement on Assessment and Student Academic Achievement states:

> **"The Commission wants to make clear that all institutions are expected to assess the achievement of their students. With this statement we make explicit the Commission's position that student achievement is a critical component in assessing overall institutional effectiveness. Our expectation is that an institution has and is able to describe a program by which it documents student academic achievement."**

The North Central Association has accepted annual HEAP reports from some Colorado institutions to fulfill the expanded student assessment requirements.

In addition to institutional accreditation by regional accrediting associations, academic programs also undergo accreditation by specialized accrediting bodies. Forty-two specialized accrediting bodies review academic programs at all levels to ensure adequate professional preparation of students. The National League for Nursing, for example, reviews associate through graduate level degree programs. Specialized accrediting bodies review a very wide range of disciplines, including business, education, interior design, law, and construction.

3. ANNUAL SCORECARD ON COLORADO PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The Scorecard is an annual report of the status of certain aspects of public postsecondary education in Colorado that is designed to provide educators, public policy makers, and the public a measurement of the performance of Colorado college students and the postsecondary system. The Scorecard presents eighteen measures to evaluate the system's effectiveness in four systemwide educational values. These values are educational excellence, educational access and diversity, efficient delivery of education, and adequacy of educational resources.

4. OTHER CCHE PUBLISHED REPORTS

CCHE produces other reports on a regular and periodic basis that provide the public with various measures of the performance of the state's postsecondary system.

Persistence and Completion Rates, Colorado Public Higher Education:

This report presents the findings of CCHE analysis of full-time student graduation, transfer, and persistence rates for all Colorado publicly supported two-year community colleges, and four year colleges and universities. Data is provided for both in-state and out-of-state students, by age, ethnicity, and gender. This information is presented both by individual institution and summarized by two and four-year sectors, allowing interested persons to examine and compare the performance of students at a specific institution, or

the entire system. This report was produced for the first time in 1991. Annual editions are anticipated.

Status of Diversity in Colorado Higher Education

This annual report provides descriptive information on enrollment, degrees granted, and employment at Colorado publicly supported postsecondary institutions. Data is provided by student residency, student class load, degree level, age, ethnicity, and gender. This information is presented in summary form by type of institution, and by the entire system, allowing examination and comparison of performance by groups of institutions, or by the system as a whole. Detailed data about the performance of individual institutions on these measures is contained in the Digest of Colorado Postsecondary Education Statistics, another CCHE document.

Certificates and Degrees Conferred in Colorado Public Colleges and Universities

This annual report provides descriptive information on the characteristics of students who received certificates and degrees from Colorado publicly supported postsecondary institutions during the previous five years. Data is provided by academic discipline, degree level, ethnicity, and gender. This information is presented by individual institution, type of institution, and by the entire system, allowing examination and comparison of performance by individual institution, type of institution, or by the system as a whole.

5. CCHE POLICIES WITH ACCOUNTABILITY COMPONENTS AND STANDARDS

In addition to the annual CCHE Accountability Report, the Scorecard, and other CCHE accountability related reports, CCHE also maintains statewide policies that prescribe specific standards with which institutions are required to comply. CCHE examines and reports annually on the compliance of institutions with these policies.

Ethnic Minority Graduation Goals:

CCHE and the higher education governing boards have established a goal to increase the representation of ethnic minority students at all levels of postsecondary education. The goal is that by the year 2000, 18.6% of college graduates from Colorado postsecondary education institutions will be ethnic minorities. (In 1988-89, 18.6% of Colorado high school graduates were ethnic minorities.) Under the program, each college sets its own annual goal for the percentage of minorities who will graduate. The annual institutional goals must, however, result in the attainment of the institution's goals by the year 2000, which in turn contributes to the statewide goal. CCHE holds colleges accountable for these goals by comparing actual graduation rates with institutional goals, and then publicly announcing the results. Institutions that do not reach their annual goals are required by CCHE to develop plans to ensure future compliance with the policy. This policy provides a standard, or acceptable level of achievement that institutions are expected to meet.

Statewide Admission Standards:

Another area in which CCHE requires a specific level of institutional achievement is the statewide admission standards policy. The admission standards, mandated by legislative directive in 1985 and first implemented by CCHE in 1986, require that four-year institutions offer admission primarily to those first-time freshmen who have demonstrated the capacity to succeed (either by high school performance or standardized test scores) at that institution. CCHE monitors institutional compliance with these standards, and assesses a financial penalty on institutions that do not maintain this level of performance.

V. EXAMINING THE ADEQUACY OF CURRENT ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS

Criteria for examination

Several criteria are useful in determining the adequacy of both existing and potential new assessment and accountability efforts. Primary criteria include both the practical effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the effort. Effective assessment efforts produce feedback about student learning that enable faculty and the institution to improve its curriculum and teaching practices. Effective accountability efforts provide information to the public and key decision makers of the performance of the state's postsecondary education system, allowing them to develop informed views about the effectiveness and efficiency of the system that they pay for. While assessment and accountability efforts must be well designed to provide useful information, they must also be designed to provide maximum benefit for expenditures of both time and money.

Analysis of Current Assessment Efforts

1. COLORADO HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM (HEAP)

The Colorado HEAP is a relatively new program in Colorado. Although it was established by the legislature in 1985, CCHE was given until 1990 to develop the program. Institutions began assessing student performance in 1989. Therefore, a substantial evaluation of the program's effectiveness after only three years of implementation may be premature. It is, however, possible to make some observations about the practical and cost effectiveness of efforts to date. When evaluating the effectiveness of HEAP as an assessment effort, it is important to keep in mind that the primary intended users of assessment are faculty.

The Education Commission of the States has named Colorado as one of the national leaders in the development of an effective statewide accountability program. It is apparent that HEAP is becoming more and more useful to institutions as it matures and becomes an established part of the campus culture. Institutional HEAP administrators report that

faculty accept assessment information more readily and make necessary curricular and teaching changes to improve student learning. Institutions also report increased value to administrators from their broader institutional perspective.

CCHE analysis of the costs of HEAP reveal that institutions estimate they spend at least $2.5 million on HEAP during FY 1990-91, down slightly from $3 million the previous year. Statewide, institutional HEAP expenditures averaged .6% of the total state appropriation and tuition revenue for that year. On an institutional basis, expenditures ranged from .01% (of state appropriation plus tuition) at Otero Junior College in 1990, to 1.51% at Pueblo Community College in 1991. Four-year institutions reduced their HEAP expenditures between the first and second years by 47%, while two-year schools increased their expenditures by 22%. The four-year institution decrease was in part due to initial computer hardware and software purchases at several of the larger institutions. In addition, several four-year institutions reduced their costs by discontinuing standardized tests. There is no doubt that statewide assessment programs require expenditure of scarce resources. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) estimates the annual cost of one value-added assessment at approximately $29,000 for a small liberal arts college, and over $120,000 at a major public research university. CCHE and governing boards also incur costs associated with HEAP. Approximately 50% of one CCHE staff person's time is devoted to this effort.

While most institutions recognize the internal value of HEAP assessment efforts, the program is not without criticism. Some institutions have expressed frustration about the cost of HEAP. Some institutions, especially those with severely constrained resources, would prefer to spend these precious resources on other activities. Other institutions do not view HEAP as an essential activity. Some institutions have also expressed concern about the HEAP annual reporting requirements, preferring to report less frequently, redirecting resources to assessment rather than reporting efforts. CCHE staff have responded to this suggestion by permitting 8 institutions that are making satisfactory progress to provide in-depth reports once every three years, instead of annually. To date, only four of the eight have elected to accept this alternative. The other four institutions consider the annual reports either intrinsically valuable to institutional review efforts, or a valuable element in their regional accreditation review. In addition, institutions have requested that HEAP be tied more closely to, or replaced in part by, the existing multi-year institutional accreditation process. Finally, some institutions charge that the HEAP annual reporting requirement of graduation and persistence data is redundant with other CCHE data reporting requirements. Contrary to this perceived redundancy, CCHE staff provide institutions that wish to do so the opportunity to review graduation and persistence data prior to release, and make necessary changes. Staff does not require institutions to submit the same data twice.

In summary, while certain reporting aspects of HEAP could be reviewed for improvement, overall, HEAP appears to be satisfactorily achieving its objectives at this point in time. The program should continue to be monitored closely for continued effectiveness.

2. INSTITUTIONAL AND ACADEMIC PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

Institutional accreditation by regional accrediting associations appears to be achieving accountability objectives. To the public, accreditation provides an assurance of acceptable quality. The effectiveness of institutional accreditation as an assessment effort is, however, less evident at this time, because student assessment requirements were only recently added to the institutional accreditation process. Institutional accreditation efforts should be monitored to ensure effectiveness in meeting assessment objectives.

Program accreditation by specialized accrediting bodies appears to be effectively meeting accountability objectives. Most institutions aspire to achieve the status that accompanies specialized accreditation of programs provides, and by doing so, must meet standards specified by the profession. Like institutional accreditation, program accreditation provides quality assurance to the public. The effectiveness of specialized accreditation in meeting assessment objectives is less apparent, however, because assessment of student outcomes is not as required in specialized program review as it is in institutional program accreditation.

3. INSTITUTIONAL ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW

Academic program review efforts appear to be very effective in assisting faculty, administrators, and governing board members in integrating their programs into statewide goals of quality, access and diversity. The external evaluation component of program review by professional societies and peer faculty from other institutions has provided valuable feedback for program improvements. Many positive programmatic changes can be attributed to the program review process. Governing boards have, for example, discontinued or consolidated programs that were no longer needed, thereby redirecting resources to evolving or high priority programs. Program review has also helped governing boards identify especially strong programs for exemplary recognition or advancement such as nomination as a CCHE Program of Excellence, or national grants.

The only criticism of the effectiveness of academic program review is from some legislators who observe correctly that the process does not provide data that is comparable between institutions. In response to this concern, it is important to note that academic program review, as an assessment activity, is designed for institutional self-assessment, not for inter-institutional comparisons. Other accountability activities provide information more appropriate for making comparisons among institutions.

While it may be useful to know the statewide costs of academic program review, actual cost data is not readily available. Because this activity has been implemented for a number of years, the costs are integrated into ongoing institutional operations.

In conclusion, academic program review is very effectively achieving its objectives at this point in time.

Analysis of Current Accountability Efforts

Effective accountability efforts provide information to the public and key decision makers of the performance of the state's postsecondary education system, allowing them to develop informed views about the effectiveness of the system that they pay for.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORTS

Each year CCHE produces an annual report on the status of higher education accountability efforts. This report is one element of the broader HEAP program described on page 5 of this paper. The first annual HEAP report to the legislature was published in 1990. This report focused primarily on the extent to which institutions had developed mechanisms to implement HEAP in its first year. Although the second annual report, produced in 1991, contained significant detail about institutional assessment results, this information was not comparable among institutions. As a result, several legislators expressed disappointment about the usefulness of the report from the legislative perspective. As a result of this concern, and the natural evolution of HEAP at the institutions, the third annual report, published in 1992, contained substantive information not only about student outcomes, but also concerning statewide policy implications of these findings. This legislative concern is the understandable result of apparent confusion between the expectations of accountability and the expectations of assessment in the HEAP legislation. The legislation specifically directs institutions to assess the knowledge, capacities, and skills of students, and to "continuously examine and adjust the content and delivery of its curriculum ..." This directive is clearly assessment oriented. At the same time, the legislation prescribes an accountability effort by directing institutions to communicate the results of assessment efforts to the public. The clash of expectations between these assessment and accountability directives is clear in the annual HEAP report produced by CCHE. While the report presents the broad results of assessment, i.e,, insufficient student advising and retention, it does not provide information to allow college-by-college comparison of these factors.

In summary, while HEAP is legislatively designed to be assessment oriented, it is also expected to provide accountability. These dual expectations of assessment and accountability pose a difficulty in determining the effectiveness of the HEAP annual reports. From an assessment perspective, the annual report effectively provides information about how institutions are addressing deficiencies identified through various assessment measures. It also reveals statewide policy implications for legislators and public policy makers to address. In this way, it achieves legislative objectives effectively. From the accountability perspective, however, the annual HEAP report does not provide information that permits institutional comparisons that some may have expected. Considerable dissatisfaction has been expressed about this perceived deficiency. From a cost-benefit perspective, the CCHE staff resources required to produce this report are moderate.

2. ANNUAL SCORECARD ON COLORADO PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND OTHER CCHE PUBLISHED REPORTS

The Scorecard could be considered the most comprehensive accountability-designed document produced by CCHE. While other CCHE publications provide more comprehensive detailed information about certain aspects of the performance of the state's postsecondary system, the Scorecard presents summary information about a number of measures in one document. Although the 1992 ScoreCard contains findings for 18 measures of these values, the only aspect of the report that was widely reported by the media throughout Colorado was adequacy of postsecondary funding. To a lesser extent, ethnic diversity of the postsecondary system also received some media attention. One legislative criticism of the first annual Scorecard which was produced in 1991, (and to some extent the 1992 edition as well), was that most of the measures did not report the performance of individual institutions on specific indicators. Instead, the information was summarized and reported by type of institution. Another criticism was that the Scorecard did not reveal how institutions performed on prescribed standards, or predetermined, required levels of achievement.

From a benefit perspective, although the CCHE staff resources required to produce this report are significant, this expenditure is valuable compared to the potential usefulness of the Scorecard.

In summary, the Scorecard has strong potential for becoming a most valuable tool in the a CCHE statewide accountability effort, especially as valid concerns about the document are addressed.

The effectiveness of other CCHE published reports, as accountability efforts, varies. The release of Persistence and Completion Rates, Colorado Public Higher Education, received very significant attention in the legislature and the media statewide. This report, which revealed that only 19% of 1986 first-time freshmen at four-year Colorado postsecondary institutions graduated within four years, led to the passage of two bills addressing higher education productivity, Senate bills 155 and 59. Similarly, Status of Diversity in Colorado Higher Education, which reported significant underrepresentation of ethnic minorities throughout Colorado postsecondary education, also received significant attention from state-level policy makers, legislators, and the media--all audiences that the report was intended to inform. Subsequent to the release of this report, CCHE strengthened the statewide Ethnic Minority Graduation Goal Policy to include financial consequences for non-compliance with specified performance standards.

On the other hand, the release of Certificates and Degrees Conferred in Colorado Public Colleges and Universities, has only a moderate impact as an accountability effort. While this document currently serves a useful information role within the postsecondary education community, it does not receive the attention of audiences that accountability efforts are intended to reach. In part this phenomenon may be due to the timing of when this

document is produced. It is released several months subsequent to the release of Status of Diversity... and CCHE postsecondary enrollment data, which contains similar conclusions.

From a cost-benefit perspective, although the CCHE staff resources required to produce these reports are significant, this expenditure is valuable compared to the benefit received.

In summary, Persistence and Completion Rates, Colorado Public Higher Education, and Status of Diversity in Colorado Higher Education are very effectively achieving their desired accountability objectives. Certificates and Degrees Conferred in Colorado Public Colleges and Universities should either be reviewed for greater effectiveness as an accountability effort, or no longer be considered for its value regarding accountability.

3. CCHE POLICIES WITH ACCOUNTABILITY COMPONENTS AND STANDARDS

As a statewide coordinating board, CCHE is in a unique position to hold governing boards and institutions accountable for achieving certain specified standards of performance. CCHE statewide admission standards, and ethnic minority graduation goals, for example specify performance levels that institutions must meet in order to avoid financial sanctions. These policies effectively achieve accountability objectives in several ways. Institutions and governing boards use these standards in their planning efforts. In addition, in order to avoid sanctions, institutions that fail to meet specified standards must explain to CCHE (in a public setting) why past efforts have failed. Most importantly, institutions must also publicly present evidence of an effective strategy to achieve desired goals. This approach has proven effective with both admission standards and ethnic minority graduation goals.

VI. NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

As stated at the outset of this paper, the purpose of this project is to assist the Commission in determining the sufficiency of current academic assessment and accountability efforts in Colorado's postsecondary education system. Such an examination must consider related discussions of assessment and accountability occurring at the national level, and their appropriateness for Colorado. The most prominent consideration currently is the Task Force on Assessing National Goals Relating to Postsecondary Education, established by the National Governors' Association (NGA) in February 1992. Before presenting the conclusions of the task force, it is important to recall the distinction between assessment objectives and accountability objectives as addressed in this paper. Assessment measures provide feedback on student outcomes that faculty use to enhance instruction. Accountability efforts inform the public of the performance of students in general. For the most part, accountability efforts, such as graduation rate reports, do not provide specific feedback that faculty can use to improve student learning. Although the objectives of assessment and accountability differ, both are of value to an effective postsecondary system.

In making its recommendations, the task force clearly distinguishes between its objective, "assuring public awareness and accountability, and the objective of stimulating reform via individually tailored assessments." While not discounting the need for assessment efforts that institutions use to reform and improve student learning, the task force clearly views such efforts as beyond the scope of its NGA directive.

Membership of the task force includes two college presidents and six state higher education executive officers, including David Longanecker, CCHE Executive Director. NGA directed the task force to:

> **1) investigate and report on the feasibility, desirability and schedule for developing standardized comparable state reports on the rate at which students entering higher education institutions complete their degree programs and by minority status, and**
>
> **2) investigate and report on the feasibility and desirability of a sample-based collegiate assessment which would provide regular national and state representative indicators of college graduates' ability to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems.**

The task force recommends developing a voluntary national system for states to report comparable data on graduation rates. In addition, the task force recommends developing a voluntary national assessment system to provide national and state indicators of college graduates' ability to think critically, communicate effectively and solve problems. The task force believes that both of these efforts would be a valuable response to public calls for increased accountability. Referring to the task force recommendation for a system to report graduation rates, the task force report states:

> **"This makes sense primarily because the consumers of postsecondary education want and deserve to know how likely it is that a student entering a given institution will stay in the institution and ultimately graduate."**

Similarly, the report provides the task force rationale for a voluntary national college graduate assessment system from a public accountability standpoint:

> **"Today, no systematic way exists to evaluate the effectiveness of the system, either based on identified standards of performance or even on a comparative basis. Existing informal evaluations, therefore are often based on valid or invalid institutional reputations and public relations efforts. Without a systematic way to gauge postsecondary education's effectiveness, public perceptions are diverging.**

The task force identifies a number of significant issues to be overcome prior to the development of both of these efforts. For the graduation rate reporting system, these issues include "mutually agreed-upon persistence indicators" ("normal" progress, for example), "meaningful degree completion statistics" (credit and programs completed, as well as

aggregate graduation rates), and other "contextual indicators" that assist the public in understanding student graduation statistics. Obstacles to developing a valid national assessment of college graduates, the task force noted, included the amount of time required, cost, as well as the difficulty of gaining consensus about the objectives of a postsecondary education. In addition, the task force report, noting the potential significant reluctance of from within the postsecondary community states, "Because objective information will challenge the validity of the current informal hierarchy in postsecondary education, those who currently benefit may well challenge the usefulness of such a system."

The report concludes by asserting that the development of national standards of performance and assessment will require national leadership and federal support.

VII. OPTIONS FOR COMMISSION ACTION

In completing its directive to develop an analytic framework for CCHE Commissioners to examine the sufficiency of current academic assessment and accountability efforts in Colorado's postsecondary education system, the team assigned to this project presents the following four options for Commissioner consideration:

Option 1: Maintain assessment and accountability efforts that are currently underway.

Option 2: Discontinue (or downsize) current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability efforts.

Option 3: Develop one system to accomplish objectives of both assessment and accountability.

Option 4: Continue current assessment activities, while enhancing accountability efforts.

Discussion of Option 1: Maintain Assessment and Accountability Efforts that are Currently Underway.

One approach would be to maintain the assessment and accountability efforts that are currently in place. Although possible improvements have been suggested in current assessment activities, (Colorado HEAP, regional accreditation of academic programs, and institutional program review) for the most part these efforts seem to be valuable in determining the effectiveness of instruction on student learning, and on developing a capacity within institutions for self-evaluation. Another point in support of HEAP efforts is that initial investments of time and effort are now beginning to pay off after four years of implementation. The institution's estimated cost of implementing HEAP has decreased.

Similarly, current accountability efforts, (HEAP Annual Reports, CCHE Scorecard and other published reports, and CCHE policies with accountability components and standards) perform a valuable role in informing the public and their elected representatives of the performance of the postsecondary system that they provide.

Maintaining the status quo with regard to current assessment and accountability efforts, would not, however be responsive to the concerns of institutions that assessment activities (especially HEAP) are costly, redundant, and less than essential. Nor would this approach be responsive to legislators who assert that accountability efforts, particularly the content of annual CCHE HEAP reports and the Scorecard, could be improved to provide more information useful to legislators about the performance of the postsecondary system. Furthermore, efforts to effectively inform the public of the performance of the postsecondary system would not be advanced by the status quo approach.

Discussion of Option 2: Discontinue (or downsize) Current Assessment Activities, While Enhancing Accountability Efforts.

Discontinuing or reducing the requirements of the Colorado HEAP, while at the same time enhancing accountability efforts, could be an alternative favored by those who would prefer less institutional autonomy and more statewide reporting of information. This alternative would be sensitive to institutional efforts to contain costs within a tight fiscal environment.

Exchanging, in full or in part, accountability efforts for assessment efforts, which have very different objectives could send a message to institutions to redirect their efforts away from institutional review and improvement. This approach could seriously diminish institutional reform efforts in which institutions have invested a great deal and have already benefitted from. In addition, discontinuing or downsizing HEAP after only four years could make institutions less likely to take future statewide efforts seriously. Eliminating or significantly reducing HEAP would require legislative change. Finally, enhancing accountability efforts implies that effective alternate strategies are known. This is by no means certain.

Discussion of Option 3: Develop One System to Accomplish Objectives of Both Assessment and Accountability.

Another approach would be to develop one approach that accomplishes objectives of both assessment and accountability simultaneously. On one hand, this could be a more efficient approach, ideally. Given, however, the somewhat different objectives of assessment and accountability, the possibility of devising a strategy that produces useful information for all intended audiences seems remote, expensive, and unlikely to accomplish in a reasonable amount of time. There is also the very real possibility that the effort to devise one measure might provide a temptation to "contaminate the test" by assessing only those areas that would result in favorable student outcomes.

Discussion of Option 4: **Continue Current Assessment Activities, While Enhancing Accountability Efforts.**

A final proposed alternative is to continue current assessment activities, addressing valid institutional concerns about HEAP reporting and other requirements, and at the same time, working to enhance accountability efforts, especially Colorado involvement in the NGA national accountability efforts. Those opposed to the national effort to report graduation rates and student performance data will object that preparation of the information envisioned by the NGA task force will only draw precious resources away from other more valuable institutional activities and not lead to real institutional reform. Alternatively, this approach could complement state oriented assessment efforts, since the NGA suggested approach would produce little in the way of feedback that institutions could use to improve instruction. If the NGA accountability-oriented approach materializes, an assessment-oriented approach such as HEAP would be an essential companion effort to balance the objectives of assessment and accountability.